Jiang Zemin and China's Leadership Succession: Process, Precedent, the PLA, and Personality

Dr. Andrew Scobell
Associate Research Professor
Strategic Studies Institute
U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013
Ph: 717-245-4213
Fax: 717-245-3820
E-mail: andrew.scobell@carlisle.army.mil

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China's top leader Jiang Zemin is scheduled to resign from his post as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002. Next spring he is supposed to step down as China's president during the country's 10th National People's Congress. If leadership can be smoothly transferred from Jiang to his designated successor, Hu Jintao, it will mark the first routine power transition without the impetus of a political crisis or the death of a top leader in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC).[1]

When one examines leadership succession in the PRC it is worthwhile to consider both the process of political succession and the nature of China's current paramount leader Jiang Zemin. A fundamental aspect of the looming leadership transition in China is Jiang's fate: Will he leave quietly after presiding over the 16th Party Congress in November? There are four possible scenarios.

First, Jiang could actually retire. Jiang could quickly vacate all his official State, Party, and military positions and fade away. I view this scenario as extremely unlikely.

Second, Jiang could be ousted, possibly in a military coup d'etat. His removal is certainly possible in the event of a major national crisis but I see this as an unlikely scenario. Still coups, both successful and unsuccessful have occurred in post-1949 China. Significantly the two I have identified occurred when "leadership transition arrangements were in flux."[2]

Third, Jiang could die while in power of natural causes. While this is certainly possible the status of his health is appears extremely good. He is a slightly overweight septuagenarian who enjoys eating but exercises regularly—swimming is his preferred activity.

Fourth, Jiang could stay in power for another five to ten years. Jiang is most reluctant to retire and will do his utmost to remain in a position of power and influence.

I argue that the most likely scenario is that Jiang Zemin stays in power for the rest of this decade although he will probably step down from formal positions of power and step back from the day-to-day duties of administering China's party-state. In my view Jiang will not willingly completely give up power and will continue to exert considerable influence from behind the scenes for the foreseeable future. There are at least five reasons for this prediction. The first three have to do with the nature of the succession process in communist China while the second two are related to the personal predilections of the man himself.

Succession Process

(1) Role of the Paramount Leader

In Chinese communist politics political power tends to be concentrated not in institutions but in individuals. The most powerful individual is usually referred to as the paramount political leader. This person does not necessarily hold a formal position of authority but de facto the individual exerts considerable power and influence perhaps not over day-to-day decisions but over all major foreign and domestic policymaking. Mao exerted such control and Deng exerted similar control in their respective tenures. While Jiang is not as powerful or unchallenged as these predecessors he nevertheless holds substantial power. Moreover Jiang's position is unlikely to be directly challenged. The position of paramount leader is sacrosanct and tends to be dependent on the health and longevity of the leader. While paramount leaders tend to be less active and involved in day-to-day political decision making, they remain key making general policy decisions and intervening in crises or controversies. Here it is important to make a distinction between first and second line leadership in Chinese communist politics. Paramount

leaders and members of their generation of leadership tend not to walk away from power completely. Rather, they step back from the "first line" to a position of elder statesman in the "second line."[3] They become in a sense a minister without portfolio akin to the current status of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew.

It is unlikely that Jiang's continued preeminence will be challenged directly because no one wants to risk rocking the boat by taking on the incumbent. While policies can be questioned and personnel selections rejected (both have happened in Jiang's China), the paramount leader remains largely unassailable. The pervasive fear of chaos or upheaval among China's leaders is such that no individual or faction is likely to want to try anything that might signal elite instability and trigger unrest. No one wants to risk adversely impacting the economy by launching a political assault. And Jiang, just like Mao and Deng, has proved adept at finding scapegoats for policy failures and defecting blame for mistakes.

(2) Process and Precedent

The leadership transfer mechanism in the PRC boils down to successor selection by incumbent. To be blunt: the paramount leader chooses his own heir presumptive. This, incidentally has tended to be the norm in communist regimes.[4] There is precedent in China: Mao did it and Deng followed the same process. But the process can be long, tortuous, and problematic. Mao found it difficult to decide on a successor and considered Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Deng Xiaoping, and Zhou Enlai before ultimately settling on the lackluster Hua Guofeng. Deng's selections, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, fell from favor. Serving as a designated successor is tricky business: fraught with pitfalls. The challenge to please one's patron is the art of quiet competence devoid of controversy all accomplished without overshadowing or embarrassing the paramount leader. Once the paramount leader selects his successor he then retires to the "second line" from active

day-to-day "first line" leadership. He still attends key meetings and reviews all major documents. In a real sense he is there looking over the shoulder of his protégé.

A coup or ouster would be almost unthinkable except in the most extreme conditions. Only once has there been a successful coup d'etat in post-1949 China and only once has a paramount leader been toppled peacefully from power. Significantly both occurred in the tumultuous 1970s at the tail end of the disastrous Cultural Revolution. The coup occurred with the arrest of the so-called Gang of Four in October 1976 while the peaceful ouster of Hua Guofeng several years later certainly qualifies as the dethroning of Mao's putative successor.[5] These unusual events occurred in times of great crisis and deep polarization in Chinese domestic politics. Moreover the targets of these ousters were either so disliked or lacking in stature that they made easy targets. Furthermore, they enjoyed either outright hostility with the People's Liberation Army or lukewarm support.

(3) People's Liberation Army

Officially, the PLA owes its full loyalty and absolute obedience to the Chinese Communist Party and this is inviolable.[6] As Mao Zedong observed: "The Party commands the gun and the gun can never be allowed to command the Party." The concept of civilian control of the military is deeply ingrained in communist China but significantly was never institutionalized. The concept has tended to rest upon the bonds of personal allegiance between senior PLA leaders and the paramount leader (e.g. Mao, Deng or Jiang). Both of the first two preeminent leaders held the position of chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) for decades and had considerable built in prestige and credibility with PLA leaders before they assumed the position. The longevity of each tended to ensure stability and continuity in civil-military relations. Jiang himself officially assumed the position in late 1989 when Deng formally resigned

from the post. Back in 1989 Jiang had no real standing among the top brass except that he was Deng's anointed successor. Jiang, unlike Mao or Deng could claim no military experience or expertise. Jiang made up for this with all he has done since then--skillfully managing to win the allegiance of military leaders.

Jiang Zemin moved adroitly to establish his authority in the PLA. As a consummate bureaucrat he quickly grasped the importance of managing the military nomenklatura—at the dawn of the 21st Century the top ranks of the PLA are filled with men Jiang has appointed and promoted.[7] Jiang moved to exercise the power of the purse more slowly. The commercial ventures of the PLA were allowed to go unchecked for almost two decades and the negative impact of this became more and more evident as the 1990s progressed. Finally, Jiang acted, primarily nudged by the rampant corruption that he believed was depriving the party-state of much needed revenues.[8] Moreover, corruption in the armed forces was of even greater concern because it is viewed as an "early symptom of the erosion of combat readiness and party control."[9] Nevertheless, grasping the powers of appointment and the purse do not a civilian controlled military make.

The mid-1998 decision to divest the PLA of its commercial holdings was not as controversial as it might have appeared and was not the civil-military contest that some depicted. It reflected a consensus decision by military and party leaders to control corruption and strengthen military readiness. Jiang's greatest crisis was over Taiwan policy in 1995 but he weathered it with flying colors. With Deng out of the picture because of illness, Jiang forged a consensus hardline policy on Taiwan, notably saber rattling in late 1995 and early 1996. Foreign Minister Qian Qichen took the brunt of criticism for assuring his colleagues that he had been promised by Secretary of State Warren Christopher that the United States would never grant Taiwan President Lee Teng-

hui a visa to visit the United States and then having to eat crow when this happened. The missile tests and air, sea and amphibious exercises constituted a "baptism of fire" for Jiang in the eyes of China's soldiers.[10] He won them over as a leader who would not back down from a humiliation and was prepared to flex military muscles when necessary.

It is arguable helpful for his putative successor, Hu Jintao, that Jiang stay on for some years in the top military position much as Deng did even after he had stepped back to the second line in the mid-1980s. The current PLA leadership owes its political loyalty to the abstract entity of the CCP and its personal allegiance to Jiang Zemin who presently holds the troika of PRC President, CCP General Secretary, and CMC Chairman. While the personal dimension may be quite firm, the political link is less ironclad.[11]

There is still weak institutional civilian control of the military in China on the eve of the 16th Party Congress. On the CCP side the tripod of party committees, the political commissar system, and the political work committees do ensure party control of the PLA for the moment.[12] However, if the past is any guide, political officers will tend to adopt the military's perspective instead of representing the party's interests.[13] Moreover, political indoctrination of the military in the 1990s takes an instrumental form that stresses blind loyalty to the party without articulating a theoretical underpinning or rationale.[14] The major organ through which actual party control is exercised is the CMC which, although chaired by Jiang with Hu Jintao as vice chairman, is dominated by soldiers.

And the state apparatus for civilian control of the military is very weakly institutionalized. While there is formally both a party and a state CMC, they are one and the same--the point is made clearly by the constant reference simply to the *Zhongyang Junwei* and omitting the prefix "Party" or "State" all together.[15] Furthermore, the

Ministry of National Defense serves purely ceremonial/diplomatic and coordinating functions—it is a place to greet foreign military delegations, etc.[16] It is significant that in key pieces of legislation such as the 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China and the National Defense Law of 1997 there is no mention made of the Ministry of National Defense or Minister of National Defense.[17]

There appears to be an unwritten pact that the PLA supports the CCP and in exchange the CCP gives the PLA autonomy over military affairs and appropriate levels of funding and guidance.[18] Thus Jiang Zemin has stressed the high-tech nature of warfighting and sought to provide the PLA with sufficient resources to develop accordingly. Nevertheless, there is a sense among soldiers that the CCP leadership has incurred a substantial debt to the PLA during the reform period and at some point the armed forces will call this in. That is, military modernization has taken a backseat to national economic development for long enough. One analyst aptly characterizes party-military relations in post-Deng China as a "bargaining" system in which the PLA must be consulted on all major policy issues.[19] Still, a remarkable and significant development is the establishment and adherence of the PLA to retirement norms established by the Party.[20]

Increasingly, military sentiment appears to question the here-to-fore sacrosanct party-army link. This takes the form of advocating the statification or nationalization [*guojiahua*] of the army.[21] The concern over the political reliability of the PLA that was raised in dramatic fashion in 1989 continues to be evident from periodic condemnations that appear in the official media of statification and "depoliticization" of the armed forces. Despite the massive political campaign launched in the aftermath of June 1989, Beijing was alarmed by the penetration of the military by Taiwanese intelligence and the Falun Gong sect in the late 1990s.[22] The ongoing vocal condemnation of Guojiahua in official newspapers and journals underscores the level of concern this appears to have in

the CCP. [23]

Jiang's Addiction and Quest

(4) Penchant for Power

Not to be overlooked is Jiang Zemin's great reluctance to relinquish power. The man clearly loves being the most powerful individual in China and the considerable perks that go with the job. He enjoys the limelight: hob-nobbing with world leaders and being front page news. Of course he wants everything to be scripted and designed to flatter and enhance his image. Thus while he is usually calm and composed in the spotlight, he flew into a rage when a Hong Kong reporter posed an impertinent question at a November 2000 news conference in Bejing. Jiang relishes his role as China's lead of state, presiding over the ceremonies marking the historic returns of Hong Kong and Macao to Chinese sovereignty. And Jiang took enormous pride in organizing an impromptu meeting of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council during the Millennium summit in New York in 2000.

Jiang is rumored to be establishing the equivalent of the U.S. National Security Council. His intention would be to become head of this potentially powerful organ. If this were to come to pass, Jiang would continue to hold a formal position of considerable power even after he vacates the posts of head of the CCP and president of the PRC. To judge by reports of a recent conversation the Chinese leader had with Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew, complete retirement is the last thing on Jiang's mind![24]

(5) Legacy of Greatness?

But even Jiang recognizes that at 76 years of age his tenure as China's paramount is limited by his own mortality. He can count on perhaps another decade of reasonably good health. Undoubtedly his foremost personal goals must be to secure his own place in

history and ensure a smooth leadership transition. The two goals are clearly linked since a successful handover of power to political successor will serve to bolster his claim to greatness. Still, a fundamental question remains: what kind of legacy does Jiang want? Jiang is overshadowed by two larger than life figures: Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. It is inevitable that he would like to be favorably compared to these giants. How can he be judged worthy? Essentially, there are two dimensions: length of leadership tenure and legacy of accomplishments. To compete in the first dimension, he must remain paramount leader for an extended period of time—preferably a decade or more. Mao ruled China for twenty-seven years, from the establishment of the PRC in 1949 until his death in 1976 (actually longer if one counts his tenure as leader of the communist movement prior to 1949). Deng ruled China for almost two decades, from 1978 until his death in early 1997. By contrast, Jiang can lay claim to being China's top leader for only five years.

The second dimension is the actual legacy of accomplishments. There are some strong hints as to how Jiang wishes to be remembered. While Mao is revered as the man who established the communist party-state and let the Chinese people "stand tall" and Deng is respected as the one who "let the Chinese people get rich," Jiang wants to be appreciated as the leader who will make China become "a strong country." Jiang's chief cheerleader within the PLA, General Zhang Wannian, said as much at the 15th Party Congress in 1997.[25] What are the specific goals Jiang might have in mind to show that China is strong? Economically, Jiang would like to see China considered as the largest economy in the world. In practical terms he will settle for China's admittance to the World Trade Organization in late 2001. In the arena of sports Jiang would like to preside over the 2008 Olympics. No Chinese city has yet to host an Olympics or any other major global sporting event of such magnitude. Jiang would also love to have a major achievement in space exploration on his watch—a manned space flight is possible before

the end of the decade. On the military side, a Chinese aircraft carrier or an enlarged nuclear arsenal to match that of the United States hold great appeal but neither are likely to come about during Jiang's leadership tenure.

But the greatest feather in Jiang's cap would be making progress on unification with Taiwan. Achieving actual unification or reaching a signed agreement setting out a timeline for unification would be the ideal legacy for Jiang. Indeed the continued separation of Taiwan and the mainland underscores the significant limitations of China's power. At present the PLA does not have the capability to seize Taiwan physically in an amphibious assault. While it could arguably impose a blockade and or use missiles to wear the island down and possibly force Taipei to capitulate, such strategies are risky and invite U.S. intervention.

Taiwan is both potentially Jiang's greatest achievement and his greatest deadweight. Unification policy is traditionally the preserve on the paramount leader, and Jiang certainly recognizes that he must provide leadership in this area. Jiang clear harbors ambitions to make progress on Taiwan; one need only recall his all-but-forgotten 1995 Spring Festival speech in which he made an eight-point proposal for moving forward on unification with Taiwan. The proposal received lukewarm response from Taipei and was quickly overshadowed by the furor that followed Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States five months later. Moreover, after all the official hype surrounding the resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macao, progress on political union with Taiwan has been non-existent. Indeed, some would argue progress on unification with Taiwan was actually regressed since the mid-1990s. Ideally unification with Taiwan would come peacefully—but it is difficult for Beijing to envision this happening given the current climate. Nevertheless, if Jiang could muster some imagination and boldness to go with his desperate desire for a legacy he just might have a

fair shot at pulling off a spectacular negotiations coup to rocket him into the same orbit as Mao and Deng.

Implications for the United States

If Jiang Zemin does remain in a position of power for several more years, the continuity he would provide would likely be good news for US-China relations. Jiang would serve as a transitional figure who eventually fades from the scene. In this role he would help facilitate a smooth transition to a new generation of leadership. Jiang's continued presence on the political scene would also serve to reassure the PLA that its interests were both being understood and being taken into account at the highest echelons of China's civilian leadership. However, if Jiang refused to step aside and stubbornly clings to power, he would serve as a barrier to peaceful political change in communist China.

[1] This testimony draw's heavily on Andrew Scobell, "Jiang Zemin and China's Leadership Transition: Legacies, Longevity, and Lines," in China's Political Succession and Its Implications for the United States, Asia Program Special Report No. 96 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars June 2001), pp. 3-6.

[2] Andrew Scobell, "Military Coups in the People's Republic of China: Failure, Fabrication, or Fancy?," Journal of Northeast Asian Studies XIV:1 (Spring 1995), p. 38. In my view the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976 qualifies as a successful coup while the attempted coup by the Lin family in 1971 rates as a coup attempt.

[3] See, for example, Ian Wilson and You Ji, "Leadership by Lines," Problems of Communism XXXIX:1 (January-February 1990), pp. 28-44.

[4] Myron Rush, How Communist States Change Their Rulers (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

[5] On the arrest of the Gang of Four, see Scobell, "Military Coups in the People's Republic of China," pp. 35-37.

[6] This section draws heavily on Andrew Scobell, Chinese Army Building in the Era of Jiang Zemin Strategic Studies Institute Monograph (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, August 2000), pp. 16-18.

[7] David Shambaugh, "China's Commander-in-Chief: Jiang Zemin and the PLA,"in C. Dennison Lane, Mark Weisenbloom, and Dimon Liu, eds., Chinese Military Modernization, (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1996), pp. 209-245; Ellis Joffe, "The Military and China's New Politics: Trends and Counter-Trends," in James C. Mulvenon and Richard H. Yang, eds., The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1999), pp. 22-47.

[8] Thomas J. Bickford, "The Business Operations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army," Problems of Post-Communism Vol 46, no. 6 (November/December 1999), p. 34.

[9] Andrew Scobell, Going Out of Business: Divesting the Commercial Interests of Asia's Socialist Soldiers Occasional Papers in Politics and Security No. 3 (Honolulu: East-West Center, January 2000), p. 5.

[10] Bruce Gilley, Tiger on the Brink (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

[11] However, this loyalty is not unconditional the way it was with Mao and Deng. Joffe, "The Military and China's New Politics," p. 46.

[12] David Shambaugh, "The Soldier and the State in China: The Political Work System in the People's Liberation Army," The China Quarterly, No. 127, September 1991, pp. 527-568.

[13] Cheng Hsiao-shih, Party-Military Relations in the PRC and Taiwan: Paradoxes of Control (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

[14] James C. Mulvenon, The Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps: Trends and

Implications, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1997), p. 73.

[15] On the Central Military Commission and the Ministry of National Defense, see the discussion in Jeremy Paltiel, "Civil-Military Relations in China: An Obstacle to Constitutionalism?" Journal of Chinese Law, Vol. 9, No. 1, (Spring 1995), pp. 48-50.

[16] See, for example, Paltiel, "Civil-Military Relations in China," p. 49; Michael D. Swaine, The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996), p. 44, footnote 16.

[17] The PRC constitution is widely available. For the National Defense Law, see "Law of the People's Republic of China on National Defense," adopted at the 5th Session of the Eighth National People's Congress on March 14, 1997 cited in FBIS-CHI-97-055.

[18] Ellis Joffe, "Concluding Comment: The Political Angle—New Phenomena in Party-Army Relations," in Larry Wortzel, ed., The Chinese Armed Forces in the 21st Century, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 1999, p. 327.

[19] James C. Mulvenon, "China: Conditional Compliance," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[20] Mulvenon, The Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps, chap. 2.

[21] Shambaugh, "China's Commander-in-Chief," pp. 219-20; Andrew Scobell, "After Deng, What: The Prospects for a Democratic Transition in China,"Problems of Post-Communism, Vol. 44, No. 5, (September/October 1997), pp. 26-27.

[22] For details of the political campaign launched in the PLA since 1989, see Shambaugh, "The Soldier and the State in China," pp. 551-568. On the Taiwan spying case, see Reuters, "PLA Pay Frozen Amid Anger at Spying Case," South China Morning Post, September 15, 1999. On the Falun Gong case, see John Pomfret, "China Sect Penetrated Military and Police," Washington Post, August 7, 1999, p. A15 and Lorien Holland, "Breaking the Wheel," Far Eastern Economic Review, August 5, 1999, pp. 16-17.

[23] For a recent example, see see Lt. Gen. Wen Zongren, "Shizhong jianchi dangdui jundui de juedui lingdao zhong shi luxing 'sange daibiao' de guanghui sixiang [Consistently uphold the Party's absolute leadership over the army and faithfully carry out the brilliant concept of the 'three represents'] Zhongguo junshi kexue,[Chinese military science] October 1, 2001, pp. 1-10.

[24] Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "China's Leaders Battle for a Place in History," September 17, 2002 from { MACROBUTTON HtmlResAnchor http://asia.cnn.com} accessed September 17, 2002.

[25] Cited in Willy Wo-Lap Lam, The Era of Jiang Zemin (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 210.